

# The Worsening Plight of Eastern Christians

Bassam Michael Madany

The West is too preoccupied with its internal problems to be concerned about the plight of Eastern Christians. In the USA, the country is still discussing the outcome of the 2016 national elections. Democrats can't believe their candidate didn't make it to the presidency! In the United Kingdom, Brexit dominates the news. On the continent, parties of the Right are gaining power, a sign that the electorate doesn't welcome the waves of migrants from the troubled Arab lands and sub-Saharan Africa.

In contrast with this negligence of the tragic situation of Eastern Christians by Western governments, I was delighted to read a BBC report on 23 May 2019 with the title, *"Iraq's Christians 'close to extinction'."* On the same date, The Atlantic published a report on *"The Impossible Future of Christians in the Middle East."*

The following are excerpts from the two reports, followed by my comments.

According to the BBC report, "The Archbishop of Irbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, has accused Britain's Christian leaders of failing to do enough in defence of the vanishing Christian community in Iraq. In an impassioned address in London, the Rt Rev Bashar Warda said Iraq's Christians now faced extinction after 1,400 years of persecution. The Christian community had dwindled from around 1.5 million to just 250,000. Those of us who remain must be ready to face martyrdom."

"The archbishop went on to accuse Britain's Christian leaders of 'political correctness' over the issue - he called the failure to condemn extremism "a cancer", saying they were not speaking out loudly enough for fear of being accused of Islamophobia."

The BBC turned to other parts of the Middle East.

"Egypt's Copts, who constitute at least 10% of the country's 100 million-plus population, have come under sustained attack from jihadists who have bombed their churches and attempted to drive them out of northern Sinai.

"In Syria, the Christian minority felt deeply threatened by the largely Islamist element amongst the rebel groups. With President Assad's forces now in the ascendant, as a result of some often-brutal tactics, Syria's Christians may be breathing a small sigh of relief."

Going back to Iraq, "the outlook for Christians remains bleak. Archbishop Warda has reached a bitter conclusion about what the future holds.

"Friends, we may be facing our end in the land of our ancestors. We acknowledge this. In our end, the entire world faces a moment of truth. Will a peaceful and innocent people be allowed to be persecuted and eliminated because of their faith? And, for the sake of not wanting to speak the truth to the persecutors, will the world be complicit in our elimination?" <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48333923>

The Atlantic report is rather lengthy and chronicles accounts of the ordeals Iraqi Christians had gone through since 2004. The following excerpts give vivid accounts of how people whose ancestors had lived for centuries in Iraq, had been forced to leave their homelands.

"About 35 miles northwest of Karamles, a town called Alqosh sits nestled below the mountains that divide Iraq from Turkey. For Christians in the Nineveh Plain, Alqosh is a place of national and religious pride, a way station for prominent figures in the ancient Christian world that some here compare in significance to Jerusalem or Rome.

"There's another history to Alqosh. Back through the winding roads of town sits a tomb said to belong to Nahum, a biblical prophet believed to have lived in the region during the seventh century B.C. Whether or not Nahum is actually interred here, Jews prayed in this place. The building was a synagogue, and the walls are covered in Hebrew. One engraved stone promise, 'This will be your dwelling place forever.'

"Jews lived in Alqosh for centuries, and in Iraq for thousands of years, although the priest who showed me around, Father Araam, knew about them only from stories. The Babylonian Talmud, which is the major text of rabbinic Judaism, was written here. Then, over a few short years, the Jews disappeared. Almost all of Iraq's remaining Jews were effectively expelled from the country in the late 1940s and early 1950s amid intense political pressure and mob violence.

"Priests in the Nineveh Plain see this history as a warning. Their communities, too, could one day be nothing more than overgrown tombs. If Christians continue to leave the Nineveh Plain and other areas like it, a powerful history will come to an end. In the Protestant mind-set dominant in the U.S., the body of the Church is wherever the people are. But for the ancient Christian groups of Iraq, this is not the case. The people I met there constantly reminded me that Assyrian culture was founded before Christianity. They point to the remnants of ancient aqueducts and settlement mounds, evidence of the empire that once flourished in this region.

"For them, Christianity is not just a faith. It is an attachment to a place, a language, a nationality. Scattered across countries and continents, that sense of identity—as a people, not just as members of a religion—is much more difficult to maintain. Securing the fate of the Nineveh Plain is crucial 'to protect our identity, our patrimony, our language,' Thabet told me. 'We are the original people of Iraq.'"

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/05/iraqi-christians-nineveh-plain/589819>

The heart-rending accounts of the ordeals of Iraqi Christians narrated in the BBC report and The Atlantic article, describe a present-day tragedy of great dimensions. To think of Jewish people that had lived for centuries in Iraq, and flourished after the end of WWI, even holding important government positions, no longer exist in the country. We may point to a comparable situation for the large Christian community that had lived in the area for centuries. For example, during the Abbasid Caliphate in the ninth century, Christians played a leading role in the cultural life of the country, by translating Greek and Aramaic works into Arabic. In contrast, fast forward to the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is an accelerated Christian exodus from Iraq that's beyond measure!

As an Eastern Christian whose formative years took place in Syria and Lebanon during the 1930's and the 1940's, I have personally experienced a steady retreat of Eastern Christianity from the Middle East. Beginning with the 1950's, at the end of the French and British presence, a wave of nationalism swept over the Arab World. Quite often, it was accompanied by xenophobia; foreign nationals were no longer welcome to live and work. It became evident in Egypt, after the July 1952 coup that toppled King Farouk. Colonel Nasser expelled the Jews that had lived in the country for centuries; descendants of Syrian and Lebanese Christians whose forefathers had settled in Egypt during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were no longer welcome!

How can we explain this tragic state of affairs? What impels Muslim societies to turn against their neighbors who had lived among them for centuries?

At this point, I refer to the works of Bat Ye'or, a specialist in the study of the plight of Eastern Christians living under Islamic rule. In 1996, she published her magisterial work under the title of *"The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude."*<sup>i</sup>

Bat Ye'or has spoken at various forums sharing the information she had included in this book. On 11 November 1996, she spoke at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on "The Decline of Eastern Christian Communities in the Modern Middle East." The following are excerpts from the lecture that throw an important light on our subject.

"[The process] of Christian demographical decline has, however, been a permanent trend in Islamized lands, sometimes accelerated by specific events, sometimes stabilized. But the process of withering away has always been there from the beginning and, with the passing centuries, Christian populations that formerly constituted majorities dwindled to minorities - even disappearing from certain regions.

"In Lebanon, Anglo-French rivalries in the context of the emancipation of the Christians provoked massacres of Christians in both Lebanon and Syria in 1841, 1842, 1845, and especially in 1860. More than 20,000 of them were killed, leaving 10,000 orphans, and 75,000 refugees, and 3,000 women were taken as slaves, not to mention forced conversions. This led to a European intervention and the creation of an autonomous Lebanese Ottoman province with a Christian Governor-General.

“At the end of the 20th century, the instability in the Arab Muslim world; the catastrophic economic situation in so many regions; the general radicalization of Islam; the failure of those Christian dreams for their autonomy, or for secularization; and the fact that Europe abandoned them, has led to constant emigration. Moreover, the strong and proud Lebanese Christian community, after first being attacked by the PLO, disintegrated in the civil conflict that opposed those of them who were partisans of an independent Lebanon, to their coreligionists who had fought against a Christian political power.

“I think that Israel has much to learn from the sad experience of Eastern Christianity, because for centuries Jews shared with Christians the dehumanizing condition of *dhimmi*s. Secondly, Israelis should reflect on Europe's conscious abandonment of the Lebanese Christians, and of its cynical choice between moral principles, on the one hand, and oil and Arab markets on the other. Israelis might reflect on how easily foreign states can provoke internecine strife when wishing to destroy a country. And moderate Muslims, who rarely bother to fight for the defence of the "rights" of their Jewish and Christian persecuted countrymen, are now being aggressed by the same forces of extremist obscurantism that previously targeted the *dhimmi*s - as in Egypt, Algeria, and other Islamic lands.”

I would like to end with one more personal note. Bat Ye'or's reference to the 1860 massacre of Christians in Syria and Lebanon, invoked a personal story. My maternal grandfather Jacob Thomas managed to leave Lebanon in time, prior to the outset of the unrest, and found residence at a coastal city in Asia Minor, not far from Tarsus, Paul's birthplace. That was where my mother Martha was born in 1898. When our family was living in Alexandretta, northwest Syria, I accompanied mother on a trip to visit her two sisters, Mary and Hanneh, who were still living in that city back in 1934! There were other Lebanese people there whose grandparents escaped the massacres! At my advanced age of 91, I often reflect on that trip that introduced me to the tragedy of Eastern Christians that has been going on ever since the seventh century AD!

---

<sup>1</sup> The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude.

By Bat Ye'or, Foreword by Jacques Ellul.

Associated University Presses, 440 Forsgate Drive, Cranbury, NJ 08512

Associated University Presses, P.O. Box 338, Port Credit, Mississauga, ON L5G 4L8

## Appendix

Bat Ye'or (Hebrew for, Daughter of the Nile) was born in Cairo, Egypt, of Jewish parents. After the military coup in July 1952, more restrictions were placed on the Egyptian Jewish community. Jews were attacked and humiliated in public places

---

and they could not answer or defend themselves. The community was already organizing the last phase of its 3000 years of history.

Bat Ye'or left Cairo at night in secret with her father and mother who could hardly walk. They had reservations on a KLM flight; they were kept at the Cairo airport for hours. Finally, they departed for Amsterdam; and settled in Britain. While studying at the London University Institute of Archeology, Bat Ye'or met David Littman a fellow-student at the Institute. They were married in 1959.

First, she began writing novels on themes of Jewish persecution in the Arab world. To accomplish that, Bat Ye'or did research about the plight of Dhimmis, a term used in its Arabic root for Jews and Christians living under Islamic rule. Eventually, that became her specialized field of research and writing.

The following is a list of her books.

1985 "The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam, Enl. Preface by Jacques Ellul. Trans. from French by David Maisel, Paul Fenton and David Littman (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/ Associated University Presses & London: AUP, 1985; 5<sup>th</sup> printing, 2001) Same in French

1996 "The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam. From Jihad to Dhimmitude: 7<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> Century." Enl. ed. Foreword by Jacques Ellul. Trans. from French by Miriam Kochan & David Littman (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/Associated University Presses; London: AUP, 1996; 3<sup>rd</sup> printing 2002)

1999 "The Dhimmi Factor in the Exodus of Jews from Arab Countries" (pp. 33-51), in Coll. work (ed.) Malka Hillel Shulewitz, The Forgotten Millions. The Modern Jewish Exodus from Arab Lands (London/New York: Cassell, 1999; Continuum, 2000)

2002 "Islam and Dhimmitude. Where Civilizations Collide" (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press/Associated University Presses and Lancaster, UK: Gazelle Book Services Ltd., 2002)